DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 007 CS 008 735

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TITLE The Effects of Practice in Retelling upon the Reading Comprehension of Proficient and Less Proficient Readers.
PUB DATE Dec 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (36th, Austin, TX, December 2-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Grade 4; Intermediate Grades; *Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Processes; Reading Research; Recall (Psychology)
IDENTIFIERS Comprehension Monitoring; *Story Retelling

ABSTRACT

A study examined the retelling performance of the novice compared with that of the expert and the effect of retelling practice on comprehension for both proficient and less proficient readers. Thirty-six fourth graders (20 proficient and 16 less proficient readers) were randomly assigned to one of four story sessions. Across the four sessions all subjects read four stories (proficient readers read fourth-grade-level stories, while less proficient readers read second-grade-level stories) and practiced retelling them into a tape recorder. At the conclusion of sessions one and four, subjects responded to eight comprehension questions--four text-explicit and four text-implicit--about the story they had read (questions were not used during sessions two and three so that the emphasis was solely upon retelling). After the fourth session subjects also answered an attitude and strategy awareness questionnaire. The four practice sessions resulted in improved reading comprehension performance for both proficient and less proficient readers. This supports the hypothesis that by engaging in verbal rehearsal of silently read discourse, the reader learns something about the organization and retention of text information. (Tables of data and references are appended.) (AEW)

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The Effects of Practice in Retelling Upon the Reading Comprehension of Proficient and Less Proficient Readers

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Running head: RETELLING

CS008735

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Paper presented at:
National Reading Conference,
Austin, Texas,
1986

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Oral language experiences are acknowledged to be a critical dimension of learning to read (Clay, 1972; Downing, 1979; Gibson & Levin, 1987). Observational research, however, suggests that elementary-age students rarely have opportunities to talk about what they have read (Durkin, 1978-79; Gambrell, 1983; Gambrell, 1986; Sirotnik, 1983). One instructional strategy which engages students in the verbal rehearsal of text-acquired information is retelling. Recent research has suggested that retelling enhances reading and listening comprehension for young children (Gambrell, Pfieffer, & Wilson, 1985; Morrow, 1984, 1985, 1986; Rose, Cundick, & Higbee, 1984). The underlying notion is that retelling requires organization of the text-acquired information and that engaging in retelling focuses the reader's attention on restructuring text in a holistic fashion.

According to the model of generative learning proposed by Wittrock (1974; 1981), in order for reading comprehension to occur the reader must engage in constructing relationships with text information. Proficient readers actively engage in building relationships 1) between text

information and their own prior knowledge (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert & Goetz, 1979), and 2) among the different parts of the text (Linden & Wittrock, 1981). One implication derived from the generative learning model is that teachers can facilitate reading comprehension of text-acquired information by providing learning experiences which induce the reader to relate parts of the text to one another and to their background of experience. Retelling is a generative task that requires the reader to construct a personal rendition of the text by making inferences based on the original text and prior knowledge (Morrow, Gambrell, Kapinus, Koskinen, Marshall, & Mitchell, 1986).

Several recent studies suggest that retelling significantly improves story comprehension, sense of story structure, and oral language complexity when used with kindergarten children as a follow-up to listening to stories (Morrow, 1984,1985,1986; Pellegrini & Galda, 1982; Zimiles & Kuhns, 1976). Only a few studies have been reported to date which investigate retelling as a post-reading instructional strategy. Gambrell, Pfieffer, and Wilson (1985) reported that fourth graders who engaged in retelling as a post-reading activity did significantly better than students producing illustrations on immediate and delayed comprehension tasks. In another study, fourth grade students who engaged in retelling did as well on comprehension tasks (text-based questions and retelling) as students who

answered questions about the text (Gambrell, Koskinen, & Kapinus, 1985). Rose, Cundick, and Higbee (1984) found that retelling significantly increased the reading comprehension performance of elementary age learning-disabled children. Taken together these findings suggest that engaging in the retelling (verbal rehearsal) of what has been read results in significant learning with respect to the comprehension and recall of discourse.

Several questions of importance emerge from a review of the research on retelling. First, do children's retellings improve with practice? This is an important question because much of the reading research to date has used retelling as a reading comprehension assessment tool (Johnston, 1983). In the vast majority of the reading research the retellings are those of novice retellers. There is a substantial body of research which documents that students in elementary classrooms rarely engage in disussing, summarizing, or retelling text-acquired information (Durkin, 1978-79; Gambrell, 1986; Sirotnik, 1983). The major question of the present study was to investigate how the retelling performance of the novice compares with that of the expert reteller who has had practice engaging in retelling. A second question addressed in this study deals with whether practice in retelling enhances comprehension performance for both proficient and less porficient readers.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for this study were fourth grade students from three elementary schools in Maryland. Criteria for inclusion in the study were as follows: a score at the 20th percentile or above on the Cognitive Abilities Test, for less proficient readers a score at the 41st percentile or below on the reading comprehension section of the California Achievement Test (CAT), and for the proficient readers a score at the 68th percentile or higher on the reading comprehension section of the CAT. The sample for the study consisted of 36 fourth grade students (20 proficient readers and 16 less proficient readers).

Materials

Eight narrative stories (four at the second grade level and four at the fourth grade level) were selected from basals which were not used in the school system curriculum. The 2nd grade stories were "Elena Can Do It", "The Collection Club", "The Rabbit's Trick", and "Cook, Little Pot, Cook". The stories ranged in length from 357 to 527 words with an average length of 436 words. Each story was analyzed using the Fry Readability Formula and determined to be written at a second grade reading level. The fourth grade stories were "Thanks Anita", "O. D. and the Cyclops", "Jackie Smith, Test Pilot", and "Stella and the Dragon".

The stories ranged in length from 740 to 1038 words with an average of 812 words. Each story was analyzed using the Fry Readability Formula and determined to be at the fourth grade reading level. In all eight stories the clear presence of basic elements of story structure was a major criterion for selection. Inter-rater reliability on the presence of basic elements of story structure (setting, theme, plot episodes, and resolution) was 100%.

A cued recall assessment which consisted of four text-explicit and four text-implicit questions was developed for the eight stories used in this study. For the scoring of the retelling task a text-based outline of the basic story structure elements for each of the eight stories was developed (Thorndike,1977). A two-item brief questionnaire was developed to probe children's attitudes and strategy awareness.

Procedures

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four story conditions. The four stories were counter-balanced across the four practice sessions in order to control for story effects. Across the four sessions all subjects read all four stories, for example, for session one, the same number of subjects read story A, story B, story C and story D.

Phase 1 - Proficient Readers

The subjects were told that they would meet with the researcher for four sessions during the following two weeks. They were informed that during the time together with the researcher they would read stories and get a chance to practice becoming a good storyteller. In order to provide a meaninful context for the retellings the subjects were told that their retellings would be tape recorded so that young children who have not learned to read would be able to listen to them tell the story. Each story was introduced with a brief motivational statement. Students were then instructed to silently read the story. At the conclusion of the silent reading subjects were instructed to "Take a minute or two to think about how you will tell the story. Let me know when you are ready to tell the story into the tape recorder." If subjects did not begin retelling within a two minute period the researcher asked, "Are you ready to begin?" and proceeded to begin the retelling by recording the following: "The story for today is (story title) and the story teller is (subject's name). The subjects then proceeded to render their retelling of the story. At the conclusion of sessions one and four subjects responded to eight comprhension questions about the story they had read. Questions were not used during sessions two and three so that the emphasis was solely upon retelling and there was no

anticipation of questioning as a part of the retelling practice. At the conclusion of the final session the subjects answered a four-item questionnaire which probed their attitudes toward retelling and their strategy awareness.

Phase 2 - Less Proficient Readers

Procedures identical to those used with the proficient reader group were used throughout phase two of the study which was conducted with the less proficient readers. The only modification was that the fourth grade less proficient readers read stories which were at the second grade level.

Scoring

Inter-rater reliability was established using ten percent of the retellings and cued recall responses. Inter-rater reliability for the scoring of the retellings was .95 and for cued recall questions it was .92. One researcher scored the remainder of the question responses and both researchers scored one-half of the remaining recall protacols.

RESULTS

This study was designed to determine if there were significant differences between the initial retelling performance and the fourth retelling performance of fourth grade proficient and less proficient readers. Because of the inherent problems involved in having proficient and less

proficient readers read the same stories the study was conducted in two phases using stories which were at an appropriate level for the subjects in each group.

A repeated measures analysis was employed to test for significant differences between session one and session four performance with respect to the retelling and cued recall tasks for the proficient and less proficient groups. The proficient readers performed significantly better on the fourth session on both the retelling and the cued recall task (Table 1). The proficient readers recalled signficantly more elements related to theme, plot episodes and resolution after four practice sessions.

The less proficient readers also performed signficantly better on the fourth session on the cued recall task (Table 2). There were no significant differences for the less proficient readers with respect to the free recall of story structure elements.

DISCUSSION

In this study only four practice sessions in which students engaged in retelling resulted in improved reading comprehension performance for both proficient and less proficient readers. This suggests that the verbal rehearsal of prose in the form of retelling may be an effective instructional strategy for improving the reading comprehension of both proficient and less proficient

readers. The results of this study support the hypothesis that by engaging in the verbal rehearsal of silently read discourse, the reader learns something about the organization and retention of text information.

The fact that there was significant improvement in the cued recall performance of the less proficient readers on the fourth session as compared to the first session, suggests that there were beneficial effects for the retelling practice. It may be that less proficient readers need more extensive practice than the four sessions provided in this study, in order to improve their free recall performance. It might be noted that in spite of the small number of subjects in the less proficient reader group (N=16) the means were in the anticipated direction with respect to performance on the retelling task. Future research is warranted which will investigate the effects of retelling across a greater number of practice sessions for less proficient readers.

With respect to the proficient readers in this study, it is clear that practice in retelling resulted in improved free recall and cued recall performance. The findings of this study support previous studies (Gambrell, Pfieffer, & Wilson, 1985; Rose, Cundick, & Higbee, 1984) which have indicated that the verbal rehearsal of what has been read results in significant learning with respect to the comprehension and recall of discourse. The findings of this

study, in particular, suggest that practice in retelling enhances story structure awareness for proficient readers.

For both the proficient and less proficient readers text comprehension improved across only four practice sessions. This raises some question about the use of retelling as an assessment tool in reading research. We know that students do not typically have classroom experience with the strategy of retelling. Performance on retelling as assessment task, therefore, is likely to reflect novice behavior. The validity of using the unfamiliar task of retelling as an assessment of reading comprehension should be pursued in future research.

The debriefing questionnaire provided some insight into students' attitudes and processing strategies. Subjects responded to the question, "How do you feel about reading a story and then retelling it?" by indicating one of the following responses: a) I really liked it. b) It's O.K. c) I didn't really like it. The majority of both proficient and less proficient readers indicated that they "really liked" retelling the story after reading it. This suggests that retelling is an appealing as well as an effective comprehension strategy.

A second second question was, "What did you think about when I told you to take a minute to think before you told the story on tape?" Twice as many proficient readers, as compared to less proficient readers, indicated that they

rehearsed the story before retelling it. Proficient readers mentioned specifics such as "thought about the beginning, middle and ending of the story," while less proficient readers reported that they "thought about the words" and "thought about the story." The response of one proficient reader provides some insight into why retelling results in deep processing, and thereby, enhances reading comprehension. The fourth grader said, "Through the whole story I thought about what I was going to say. When you said, "Think," I thought about it some more. I always thought I didn't have to pay attention to stories, but now I have to so that I can retell it."

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Table 1 - Means and standard deviations for retelling and cued recall performance for proficient readers (N=20)

	Session 1		Session 2	
	M	SD	M	SD
Retelling Task				
Setting	3.95	1.43	4.50	1.24
Theme	1.50	.61	1.90	.45*
Plot episodes	5.25	2.55	7.40	2.83*
Resolution	.65	.49	.80	.41
Total Story Structure	11.30	4.38	14.60	3.56**
Cued Recall Task	4.70	1.49	5.90	1.74*

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Note: Maximum score possible for the cued recall task was 8.

Table 1 - Means and standard deviations for retelling and cued recall performance for less proficient readers (N=16)

	Session 1		Session 2	
	M	SD	M	SD
Retelling Task				
Setting	5.00	2.03	5.50	1.63
Theme	1.44	.63	1.69	.70
Plot episodes	3.94	1.88	5.00	1.83
Resolution	.63	.50	.69	.48
Total Story Structure	10.38	4.22	12.89	3.61
Cued Recall Task	5.18	1.64	6.81	1.28*

*p,.05

Note: Maximum score possible for the cued recall task was 8.